

Have Hammer. Will Travel.

Lending a hand to help preserve an island's past, present, and future



Dean Skaugstad and other Sanibel Islanders (inset) lend a hand (and a hammer) to worthy island construction projects that range from wildlife habitats to historic preservation.

by Libby Boren McMillan

Watch out! Look around you! You may be surrounded by...Hammerheads! Actually, this would be a *good* thing, particularly if you like to visit the Clinic for the Rehabilitation of Wildlife (C.R.O.W.) or the Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation (SCCF).

Sanibel resident Dean Skaugstad and a dozen other islanders with construction backgrounds are responsible for a myriad of on-site projects for both organizations.

"We have built whole buildings," explains Skaugstad. "We do all the SCCF repair work and a lot of the new work, all kinds of things up there. We built the butterfly habitat, we built the complete native plant nursery, and we built the shade house and all the plumbing that goes with it. We did a lot of the work on the main building at SCCF, including the porches and the

walkways in the swamps." They are currently remodeling the SCCF employee housing.

The same wonderful story has been unfolding over at C.R.O.W., albeit the housing has been of a different nature. "We built a number of cages for the animals, all kinds of descriptions, as well as just doing constant repair," he says.

How did this group with the fitting name come about? "The foundation has always had a group of guys who have done work for them," explains Skaugstad. "Probably for thirty years. But about ten years ago," he says, "we decided to maybe branch out a little bit. Someone came up with the name, and it stuck. That's when the Hammerheads came about."

The highly skilled volunteer group was immediately besieged with work requests from organizations all across the islands. "Because we were cheap—you buy the

PHOTO BY KATHLEEN BLASE

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The Village
ON VENETIAN BAY



Retired contractor George McKinnell (left) and preservation buff John Veenschoten (above) led the team responsible for restoring much of the Sanibel Historical Village.

materials, we do the work—we had all kinds of people calling us. I had a real dilemma,” says Skaugstad. “I had to set up some criteria,” he says, “so wherever we did work, the mission of the organization had to blend with the mission of SCCF: dedicated to natural environment and habitat.”

C.R.O.W. made the shortlist, as did the marine lab at Tarpon Bay, which is part of SCCF. “We basically limited ourselves to those two organizations by our mission statement,” says Skaugstad. “Rather than hurt anybody’s feelings, this is the criteria we go by.”

The Hammerheads are a diverse group of men, with membership peaking at sixteen in high season. Four of the fellows are year-round residents and volunteers, working three days a week, even on the hottest days of summer. “We’re the hard core,” laughs Skaugstad. Surprisingly, doctors, lawyers, and even a general have qualified to be in the Hammerheads. “We all have a heavy background in construction,” explains Skaugstad, who coordinates the jobs and lines up the materials.

Amazingly, our little island has another group of like-minded fellows (members of the two groups overlap in many cases). They have had many names, none of which have stuck through the years. Some know them as John’s Angels.

This group began “about fifteen years ago,” says John Veenschoten, “when we restored the old original Bailey store. I put

that group together. After the store was moved over to the Sanibel Historical Village, the acting board of the preservation committee for the city wanted to restore it to the original look of the turn of the century, and I was on the board at that time.”

Veenschoten was in the antique business for many years, dealing in eighteenth-century American antiques. “My interests have always been in preservation,” he says. “I have no formal training, but I know what needs to be done when you’re going through a restoration.”

Veenschoten and his group were responsible for the recent renovation of the Old Schoolhouse Theater, but used other volunteers. Under the direction of retired contractor George McKinnell and the preservation-minded Veenschoten, the theater became a Sanibel schoolhouse once again. Several Hammer-

heads also volunteered to work on the project on their own time.

“We had to get a few permits,” says Veenschoten, “and to some extent the officials made us bring it back to code. They are a little more liberal with a restored

building, because no one is living in it. There’s no danger to human life. But we want it to survive. We applied the current principles of building, hoping to preserve it through hurricanes.”

All the buildings at the Historical Village came through Hurricane Charley with almost no loss at all. “When other buildings were being torn apart,” says Veenschoten, “ours were not. That’s

partly due to early construction forms, the way roofs were built, and so forth. They were made to hold together during a bad hurricane.”

For their work on the Bailey store and

The highly skilled volunteer group was immediately besieged with work requests from organizations all across the islands.



the schoolhouse, Veenschoten's group often used materials that were specially constructed for them—materials that copied the form and type of wood in the early construction. "It's important when you're

restoring a building to make it as close as possible to what it was," he says, "so that the integrity of the building is kept."

This can be a tricky process. When the group rebuilt the Bailey packing house from scratch, Veenschoten found a local mill that cut cypress. "I had a terrible time trying to find cypress wood. [The finished product] was a little crude, which was fine with me. I wanted it a little crude."

Most of Veenschoten's group is made up of retirees, and again, is diverse. "It's a group of men and women who enjoy each other's company and have some physical skills that are used in building. We have lots of guys who know how to use a hammer. We find there are plenty of guys who like to go in and knock something apart, too," he says with a laugh.

"We're going to need some painters," says Veenschoten. "That's the one job [at the schoolhouse] that isn't finished. We're trying very hard to get that building in shape so it can be used for museum visitors. Hopefully, it will be done soon." 🐼

Libby Boren McMillan lives with her handy husband, Michael. She tries to limit the "honey-dos" to one or two per month.



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